

# ABSURD RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN INDIA

## People Worship Snakes and Monkeys There.

CALCUTTA—It seems hard to believe that in this civilized day there should exist anywhere such preposterous absurdities as are practiced in India in the name of religion. Although England has ruled here for more than a century, and the protestant missionary societies have spent upwards of a hundred million gold dollars in trying to make converts to Christianity, the mass of the people still adhere to the ridiculous practices of the ancients. We find them worshipping snakes and monkeys and held in awe by the false pretenses of charlatans and sorcerers. Although the message of the Nazarene has gone afar, it has affected India so little that the dead are still burned on the banks of the sacred river or left in towers for the vultures to devour.

The sacrificial goat is tethered in the temple yard as in the days of the patriarchs, and the people are held in subjection by the fear that the priests will pronounce curses upon them similar to that which the Scriptures tell us Noah visited upon his son Ham. Superstition is so rife that when a Hindu starts to work in the morning, if his path is crossed by a cat or a snake or a jackal he considers it an evil omen and is quite likely to postpone the business until another day. Laborers frequently return from the field and put up their oxen for no other reason than this.

### FICTION WRITERS OUTDONE.

The four marvelous books which the Brahmins wrote were inscribed on pages of gold, and the most versatile fiction writer of modern times could not produce more fanciful nor elaborate tales than these works contain. In them it is stated that near the center of the continent of India there is a mountain of gold 144,000 miles high, on the thousand summits of which the gods have fixed their permanent abode. At the foot of this mountain grows a tree which is 9,000 feet high and 9,000 feet in circumference. The juice of the fruit of this tree, which falls of its own accord when ripe, forms a large river which flows toward the west and which possesses the power of converting everything it touches into gold. It is written here that God embodies the form of a white pig.

One of the old stories in these time-honored volumes tells of a man who was possessed with evil spirits. When this unfortunate was finally delivered of his torment a flock of crows flew out of his person. In testimony of the undoubted power of sorcery it is related that at a certain feast a wizard, by uttering some mystic words, turned all the dishes into frogs. By pronouncing the words backward the frogs became dishes again, and the banquet went merrily on. A favorite recipe for visiting disaster upon an enemy is to gather a quantity of mud from sixty-four different filthy places, knead it together with hair, nail parings and bits of leather, then mould it into a small figure. Across the breast of this image is written the name of the hated person. After this certain words and spells are repeated. When this is done the planet is supposed to take possession of the unfortunate person against whom the incantations are directed, and he is exposed to a thousand ills.

### OLD RELIGIOUS SHELL GAME.

There is no trick to which Brahmin priests will not resort in order to excite the fervor of the worshippers, and thus enrich themselves by the offerings of the ignorant. Although the oracle is out of date in most countries where pagan priests impose upon the people, it is still worked in India with great success. Sometimes the idol itself addresses the awe-struck crowd of people who listen with their hearts in their mouth as the image of stone finds



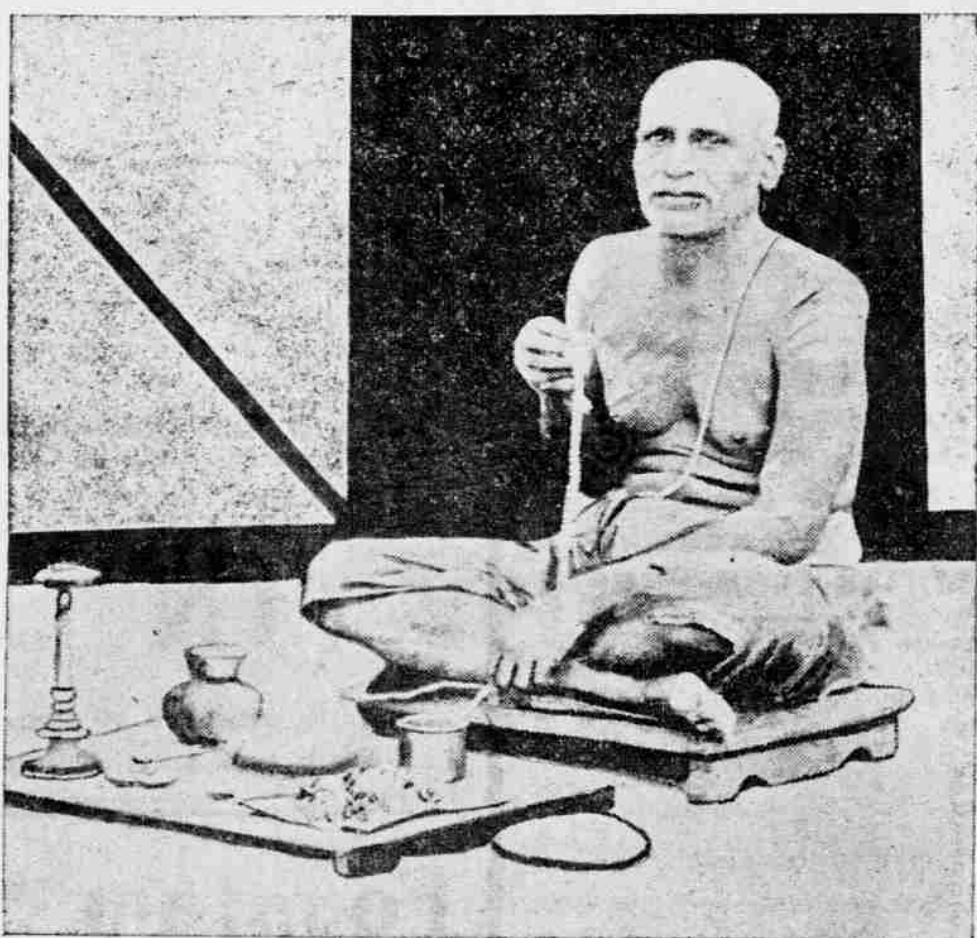
THE SACRED CITY OF BENARES.

voice and threatens them with dreadful punishments if their flow of offerings is not increased. Often the idol will issue a proclamation that if the people do not increase its bounty it will withdraw protection from them and decamp in search of a more appreciative and generous constituency. The poor dupes are unable to understand that some cunning rogue is concealed inside the stone figure and that it is his voice they hear.

Another device of the priests to increase the revenue of the temple is to bind the hands and feet of an idol with chains. When the people arrive and find the deity in this condition it is announced that cruel creditors have brought about this humiliation be-

cause the idol stricken with sickness. The worshippers will find the priests chafing the temples and head of the god with strange drugs and decoctions, feeling its pulse from time to time, and all the while wearing a mien of gravest apprehension. In response to the inquiries of the people the priests announce that the idol has lost heart at the absence of generosity on the part of its devotees and lacks the courage to resist the illness which has beset it. A great surry ensues and presents and offerings soon begin to arrive from every direction, after which the idol shows signs of convalescence and is eventually restored to health.

One method of stimulating a sense of awe and obedience in the populace is



BRAHMIN PRIEST AT PRAYER.

cause the god is unable to pay money which it had borrowed in a time of great need. Touched with compassion for the embarrassment of the idol, the people from far and near pour in contributions. As soon as the stipulated sum is forthcoming the shackles fall from the idol amid great rejoicing from the worshippers, who congratulate themselves upon having extricated the image from its dilemma. In some temples silver chains are used to bind the gods.

### HOW TO CURE AN IDOL.

Still another effective ruse is to have

to send forth a charlatan who falls into convulsions and terrifies the onlookers by his fearful contortions and grimaces. These spasms are intermittent and between spells the fakir will tell the crowd that he is possessed of a devil as a punishment for not regarding the advice of a priest. After exhorting the multitude to profit by the terrible example which he affords them and never to disobey the priests, he falls into another fit, and the simpletons who surround him shake their heads gravely and vow never to question the words of their spiritual advisers again. It goes without saying that the sufferings of the fakir are imaginary and that the whole performance is merely a clever piece of buncombe.

### WIZARDS TEST THEIR SKILL.

Another proceeding which always arouses great interest and serves to awe all who witness it, is a public test of skill between two men of professed occult power. The test generally consists of trying to lift from the ground some spell-bound object, such as a straw or match. The antagonists arrange themselves opposite each other at an equal distance from the object they wish to approach and pretend to have the power to hold each other back by uttering mystic chants and sprinkling themselves with holy ashes.

An invisible but irresistible force seems to drive first one back and then the other. They try again and again to advance toward the object, but as often fall back in failure. As a result of their labor their bodies begin to twitch with convulsive movements, sweat streams from every pore, and they spit clots of blood. Finally one of them falls unconscious and his opponent snatches the spell-bound object amid great confusion. A sickness of several days is supposed to result to each of the contestants in a trial of this nature, but in reality it is a shameless farce, admirably acted for the sake of increasing the respect of the populace for men claiming to have mystic powers.

The priests have been so successful in inculcating the idea that donations to the gods are necessary as atonement for all sins, as well as deliverance from all ills, that there is not a single Hindu who does not make a vow to perform something more or less onerous on condition that he is relieved of illness or delivered from some predicament in which he may find himself. The many acts to the temple a piece of cloth, gold or silver ornaments, pre-

cious stones, or other valuable gifts. In case where a person's eye or ear is affected it is the usual custom to offer the idol a small image of the diseased part fashioned in gold or silver.

### CRAZY ACTS OF VOTARIES.

The belief that generosity and physical ordeal are the means of winning the favor of the gods is so general, that many worshippers give themselves over to disgusting and ridiculous acts of fanaticism. The forms this religious frenzy takes are innumerable. Sometimes a votary will vow to sit still in a chair for six months, while another will measure his length along the ground for miles in token of his submission to some particular idol. There are other who have held one arm in the air over their heads for years, until the joints became stiff and the uncut nails curved inward and grew through the hands. Some will fasten their jaws together with wire and take no food into the mouth except in liquid form. Enthusiasts are often met who have vowed to leave their hair untouched for months. These present a disgusting sight, as their tangled shocks are one mass of filth and vermin. Some vow to go naked in order to show their devotions, and there are even instances where a misguided fanatic has cut off half his tongue and offered it to an idol—all in the name of religion.

One of the most dangerous practices is snake worship. The holes in the mounds where the reptiles are likely to be found are visited from time to time in order to leave milk, eggs, bananas, and other food which a snake would likely fancy. If a reptile enters a home it is not killed, but is protected and fed, though its presence is a constant menace to the lives of the whole family. Even if it should kill one or more members of the household, sacrifices would still be offered to it daily. Temples abound where snakes are kept for the convenience of worshippers, and on account of the protection which is thus afforded them the reptiles multiply until the whole neighborhood is alive with them. Anyone who would even suggest destroying them would be in disgrace with the whole community.

### OBSERVING THE PUJA.

The religious festivals called Pujas are observed with a sentiment which approaches raving ardor. During the time of these demonstrations the entire population refrains from work and gives itself over to unmitigated carousals. The program consists of erecting an image of some particular idol, to which offerings of every sort are given and sacrifices of goats are made. After the image has been properly feted on land, the revelation form a procession to the bank of the river, where an excursion on the water follows. After this the idol is dumped overboard thus passing theoretically to paradise.

One of the popular deities is Durga, the ten-armed goddess, carrying in her numerous hands as many different weapons, viz: sword, dagger, lance, stiletto, saw, cleaver, knife, boomerang, tomahawk and screw-driver. Durga is really a number of images joined in one group, among them being a son who is a war deity, and another who is financial secretary to the gods. The group includes the birds and animals which the gods ride. The goddess herself is seated on a lion, while the war god bestrides a gorgeous peafowl, and the financial secretary a rascally rat. This rat is called a rascal because he has the unfortunate habit of eating all the rainbow gems which are said to be hatched by the peafowl which his brother rides.

### A GLIMPSE OF BARBARISM.

The scene of one of the Pujas is a glimpse of ancient barbarism. Around the image are the prostrate supplicants, the women praying for male children and the men asking the favor of the destruction of their enemies. The offerings consist of piles of fruit and vegetables, bundles of cloth, pyramids of soaked rice, hillocks of peas and coconuts, and hundreds of candles burning in broad day. On the outer circle dogs sit on their haunches and cats lick their mustaches at the sight of the tempting things piled in such profusion.

Clouds of incense smoke drift upwards and the ground is stained with the blood of the goats whose heads have fallen under the sacrificial sword. Above the bedlam of voices is heard the metallic crash of huge bells and the thump of drums. The goats are beheaded one after the other by an immense butcher who is as black and fierce as the Duke of Thunderland.

(Continued on Page 7.)

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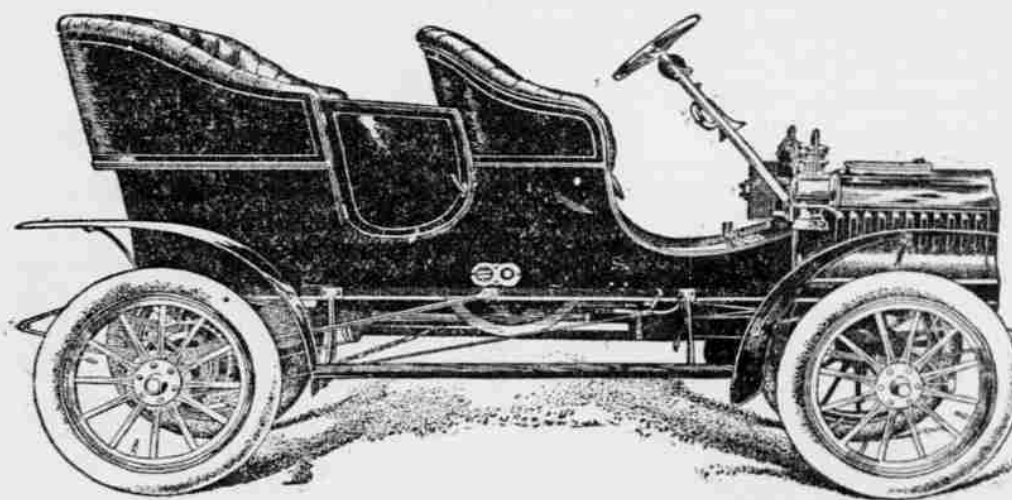
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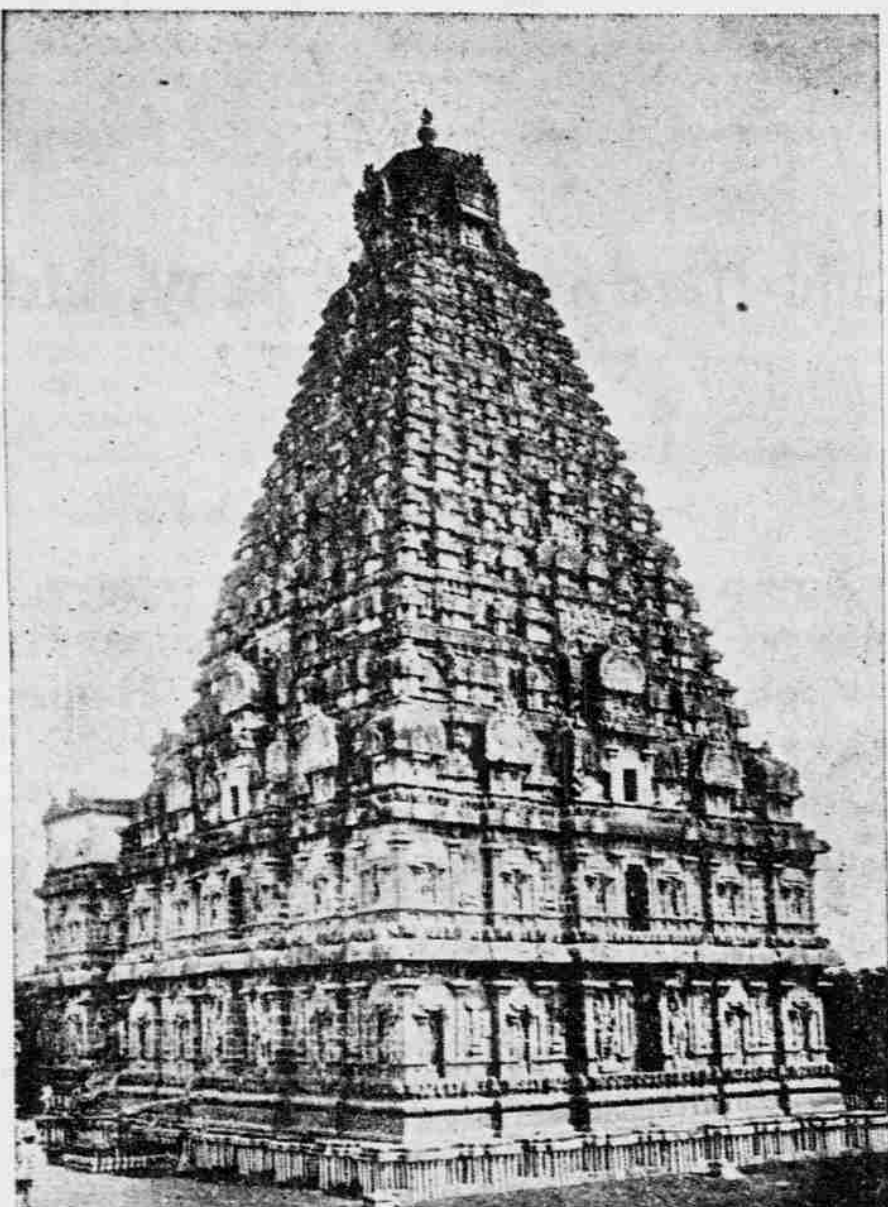
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